

House Democrats elected Rep. Steny Hoyer to majority leader Thursday, giving Maryland an influential voice in national policy decisions.

Hoyer defeated Rep. John P. “Jack” Murtha of Pennsylvania with plenty of room to spare, garnering 149 votes to 86 for Murtha.

The Democrats rebuffed the wishes of incoming Speaker Nancy S. Pelosi. Murtha is a close ally of Pelosi’s who gained notoriety earlier this year when he called for an end to U.S. military operations in Iraq.

The bitter competition divided Democrats just one week after they won control of both chambers of Congress in a landslide election. But the newly elected leaders emerged pledging unity after the morning vote.

“Nancy and I have worked together for four years, closely and effectively, and we have created the most unified caucus in the last half-century,” Hoyer said. “Nancy and I, I think, have been a good team.”

Democrats on Thursday unanimously elected Pelosi (D-Calif.) to become the first female speaker prior to the more contested vote for the No. 2 slot.

Pelosi and Hoyer have led the minority Democratic caucus since 2002, but their frosty relationship stems from a nasty 2001 fight for minority whip, in which Murtha, 74, ran Pelosi’s campaign.

All along, Hoyer said he was confident that he had enough votes to win Thursday’s election, even though Pelosi publicly endorsed Murtha in a letter circulated to colleagues on Sunday.

Hoyer responded with letters of support from numerous coalitions.

“In my opinion, it was not that somebody was rejected today,” Hoyer said on Thursday. “It was that a team that had been successful was asked to continue to do that job on behalf of the American people.”

Hoyer announced that Murtha, an ex-Marine, will chair the Defense Appropriations Committee, a coveted appointment that will let him be an outspoken voice on the war in Iraq.

Murtha said the Democratic triumph last week might help alter the military strategy overseas.

“I think the Bush administration is beginning to get the word,” Murtha said.

Other Maryland lawmakers said Hoyer is the best man for the job.

“He has the skills for the kind of coalition-building we need,” said Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D), chair of the Maryland delegation.

Del. John Bohanan, who is a senior adviser to Hoyer, predicted the region and state will profit from his boss’s promotion.

“This is big for Southern Maryland, obviously. It’s big for the whole state,” he said after announcing Hoyer’s election at St. Mary’s County Chamber of Commerce luncheon.

Bohanan (D-St. Mary’s) also said he believes the rift between the Hoyer and Murtha camps “will evaporate almost immediately.

“Like one of Hoyer’s favorite sayings, ‘You don’t live life looking through the rear view,’” he

added.